



File Code: 1950

Date: August 05, 2020

Dear Friends of the Mount Rogers NRA,

The USDA Forest Service, is seeking comments in regards to a habitat improvement proposal on Whitetop Mountain in the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area in Grayson, Smyth, and Washington Counties, VA.

## Purpose and Need for the Project

The purpose of this project is to restore the red spruce (*Picea rubens*) dominant spruce-fir habitat on Whitetop Mountain in the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (NRA). This project has the potential to improve habitat connectivity for the Federally-listed Carolina northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus coloratus*) and spruce-fir moss spider (*Microhexura montivaga*). It is designed to benefit both species as well as the suite of species dependent on remnant boreal forest by providing higher quality and denser stands of red spruce on Whitetop Mountain. The project will be focused in areas dominated by northern hardwood species with advanced regeneration of red spruce in the midstory and understory.

This project is a high priority for Virginia red spruce restoration because Whitetop Mountain is above 5,000 feet in elevation. These areas are a strong focus of the Southern Appalachian Spruce Restoration Initiative for the long-term viability of spruce in a changing climate. Opening of the canopy through the targeted girdling of hardwoods will increase the opportunity for additional regeneration from seed production of upper canopy spruce.

Spruce and spruce-northern hardwood habitats are vital for the survival of many rare and federally listed species endemic to these habitats include the Carolina northern flying squirrel, spruce-fir moss spider, Northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), Weller's salamander (*Plethodon welleri*), Northern pygmy salamander (*Desmognathus organi*), and rock gnome lichen (*Gymnoderma lineare*). If this project is not implemented, it could impair the long-term viability of this spruce-fir habitat and the associated dependant species.

## Proposed Action

The forest service is proposing to restore spruce within the Whitetop project area by implementing the following actions:

- Release red spruce in the mid-story and understory by girdling and felling northern hardwood trees that fall within the vertical cylinder (10 – 15 ft.) projected above targeted



release trees. More information about methodology can be found published in the Natural Areas Journal titled Release of Suppressed Red Spruce Using Canopy Gap Creation – Ecological Restoration in the Central Appalachians which can be found at the link below. [https://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/pubs/jrnl/2016/nrs\\_2016\\_rentch\\_001.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/pubs/jrnl/2016/nrs_2016_rentch_001.pdf)

- Improve spruce stand resiliency by stratifying existing single-aged spruce stands with canopy gaps. Gap creation would involve girdling two to five mature spruce trees per acre, targeting unhealthy spruce when present.
- Planting red spruce seedlings in suitable sites currently absent of spruce. Seedlings will be acquired through either nursery stock grown from Whitetop spruce cones or by transplanting seedlings from within the project area. Once established, seedlings would be released through girdling and brush cutting as needed.

These activities would take place gradually as funds and labor become available. It is expected that it would take over ten years to treat all the currently suitable restoration sites within the project area boundary, and new treatment areas would emerge down the road as initial treatments start to show success. The project area boundary is designed to incorporate all potential spruce restoration sites outside designated Wilderness Areas. Not all acres within the boundary are planned for treatment, only those that are deemed suitable for spruce restoration.

## Decision to be Made

We anticipate this proposal to be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) under 36 CFR 220.6(e):

*Category 6: Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction. 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)*

The responsible official for the decision will be the Area Ranger for the Mount Rogers NRA. The decision to be made is whether the proposed habitat restoration activities should occur on the appropriate sites within the Whitetop area. The project is subject to the design criteria and Management Prescription limitations described in Appendix A.

## Public Involvement

As a result of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Public Law No. 113-76) and the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill, Public Law No. 102-381), the Forest Service will no longer offer appeal opportunities for categorically excluded projects. However, we will continue to offer public involvement opportunities for these projects and will take public comments into consideration before final decisions are made. Therefore, we welcome your involvement and



encourage your comments on this proposal. Comments received, including names and contact information of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Written comments concerning this proposal will be accepted until Thursday, August 20, 2020. Comments may be submitted through the Whitetop Spruce Restoration Project website via the web form:

<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=57641>

This web form can also be accessed from the project website:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57641>

On the right side, you can select "Comment/Object on Project."

Written comments can also be submitted hardcopy to:

USDA Forest Service  
ATTN: Barry Garten, Area Ranger  
3714 Highway 16  
Marion, VA 24354

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx).

Please share any specific concerns that you feel need to be considered within the context of this proposed action. Make your comments as concise as you can and address the proposed action specifically. State "Whitetop Spruce Restoration" in the subject line when providing electronic objections, or on the envelope when replying by mail.

If you have questions about this proposal please contact Chris Brown at (540) 953-3570, or by email at [christopherjbrown@fs.fed.us](mailto:christopherjbrown@fs.fed.us). Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forests.

Sincerely,

/s/ *Barry K. Garten*

BARRY K. GARTEN  
Area Ranger



## Appendix A.

### Treatment Prescription (Rx)

The project will be focused in areas dominated by northern hardwood species with advanced regeneration of red spruce in the mid-story and understory. Targeted hardwoods that fall within a vertical cylinder projected above the perimeter of the crowns of target red spruce will be girdled to stimulate the growth of adjacent understory and mid-story spruce. Depending on the height disparity between target red spruce and overstory northern hardwood trees, this vertical cylinder will be extended up to 10 to 15 feet.

Targeted hardwood species include sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), yellow birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), black birch (*Betula lenta*), American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), yellow buckeye (*Aesculus flava*), and northern red oak (*Quercus rubra*).

### Design Criteria

- Eastern and Carolina hemlock (*Tsuga spp.*) will be designated as leave trees and will not be girdled as part of this project.
- Any other trees species identified as Federally-listed or on the Regional Forester's sensitive species list will be designated as a leave tree.
- Targeted hardwood trees that exist as dead snags or that contain cavities will be left so that significant changes in habitat conditions for Carolina northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus coloratus*) and Federally-listed bat species do not occur.
- Treatments will occur outside of the Carolina northern flying squirrel breeding season. Specific dates will be determined by District or Forest Wildlife Staff.

